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REASON: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

¶1. (C/REL UK, AUS) The rising violence that has gripped Basrah results largely from Iran's success in commandeering and empowering Basrah cells of the Ja'ish al-Mahdi (JAM). This is the near unanimous view expressed by Iraqi and Coalition sources tracking the declining security situation in Iraq's second city, which lies a few miles from the Iranian border. JAM, which Moqtada al-Sadr (MAS) formed in 2003 to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq, has split into two factions - a nationalist faction, loyal to MAS, and a pro-Iranian faction that is said to be carrying out most of the violence in Basrah. This cable describes the Basrah JAM and its members, Iranian influence in JAM, and the split between those elements under Iranian influence and those loyal to MAS. End summary.

BASRAH JAM

¶2. (C/REL UK, AUS) JAM (aka the Mahdi Army) was formed by Moqtada al-Sadr as the military wing of his Office of Martyr Sadr (OMS) party to enforce the Sadrist's nationalist - anti Coalition/anti Iran - agenda and to protect Shi'as from attacks by Sunni insurgents, particularly al-Qaeda. Since there are few Sunnis and minimal al-Qaeda activity in southeastern Iraq, JAM has focused its efforts on asserting its dominance throughout the region. In Basrah, it has reportedly taken control of the Um Qasr ports and seeks to wrest control of the oil industry from Fadhila. JAM has also undertaken a campaign to expel the "occupiers," and over the last year, with Iranian support, it has increased attacks against the Coalition.

¶3. (C/REL UK, AUS) JAM also seeks to emulate Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah, purporting to defend the interests of the poor and downtrodden, such as orphans and widows. Its support base is centered in urban slums, such as the Hayanniyah and Jumhurriyah districts. Most of the residents in these districts are the so-called "Marsh Arabs," who were displaced after Saddam drained the marshes, and those who migrated in search of jobs. The levels of education and income in these areas are low; unemployment is high and educated Basrawis look upon these residents with contempt. During a raid on a JAM cell in late April, British forces recovered a 27-page notebook containing the names and phone numbers of people apparently receiving welfare payments. However, local sources say that the extent of

JAM's largesse is much less than it claims. If a JAM militant is arrested, then the organization will provide support for the militant's family while he is incarcerated, but systemic community programs do not exist. JAM has however proved adept in creating public relations opportunities. For instance, under Operation Sinbad, British forces rehabilitated schools throughout Basrah. After completion of the work, JAM members would invariably move in, post JAM propaganda, and claim credit for the renovations. The Basrah public however is becoming disenchanted with JAM and its tactics. Its inaccurately aimed rockets and mortars do as much damage to Iraqis living near the Coalition installations as to foreign forces. In May, Basrah civic groups staged street demonstrations to demand that the militants stop the indiscriminate fire and threatened to retaliate if they did not. (See ref. A.)

¶4. (C/REL UK, AUS) While JAM may purport to be the protector and benefactor of the downtrodden, in reality, it is a decentralized amalgamation of cells that wreak terror throughout Basrah and engage in criminal activity - "thugs and thieves." JAM's modus operandi is to terrorize citizens into submission and carry out attacks against the Coalition. Despite its weak power structure and the incoherency between cells, it has evolved into the most notorious and probably the most powerful militia in Basrah, primarily through its Iranian benefactors. Its fighters are effective in supporting each other in the urban war that has engulfed the city. For example, if a militant is arrested at a police checkpoint, his comrades will intimidate the director of the detention facility into releasing him. After the release, gunmen will go to the checkpoint where the arrest was made and kill the policemen. In one instance, JAM militants captured a group of Iraqi Army officers and shaved their heads. Such tactics effectively terrorize well-intentioned policemen and soldiers from acting to defend public security.

¶5. (C/REL UK, AUS) JAM has also infiltrated the Basrah Police force through political patronage, and its members often conduct acts of violence against citizens and the Coalition while in uniform, utilizing police vehicles. In one instance a British

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Police delegation was departing from a police station when a man in a police uniform fired an RPG at their convoy. More recently, British soldiers stationed at the police headquarters have come under fire from within the compound. The notorious Basrah Police Serious Crimes Unit, which MND-SE sought to disband in December 2006, continues to operate as a JAM cell. (See ref. B.) On June 15, its members openly engaged a British patrol following the destruction of a Sunni mosque. There are also indications that Iraqi Army units drawn from Basrah, such as the 10th ID, 1st Bde., are also under JAM influence.

¶6. (C/REL UK, AUS) Lately there have been reports that some JAM cells are seeking to impose Taleban-like restrictions throughout the city. For example, barbers have been assassinated because they cut hair in a modern, un-Islamic style; produce vendors have been threatened for displaying bananas or tomatoes and cucumbers together due to perceived sexual connotations; ice vendors have been killed by gunmen who proclaim that the Prophet Mohammad did not drink cold water; taxi drivers are forced from their vehicles because the Prophet did not drive; and owners of tire repair shops have had their air compressors riddled with bullets by gunmen who say air has been provided by God who intended it to be free, not bottled up in tanks. These acts are antithetical to JAM's nationalistic objectives and reflect more of a Wahabi-style fundamentalism, despite their claim to be committed Shi'as.

WHO ARE THE BASRAH JAM GUNMEN?

¶7. (C/REL UK, AUS) Estimates of JAM's hard-core members range from 300-400 to 1500-1700, with perhaps as many as 10,000 to 15,000 sympathizers in Basrah. (See ref. C.) They hail from urban slums, such as the Hayanniyah and Jumhurriyah districts. Ironically, these neighborhoods where JAM draws its recruits were the most boisterous in welcoming the Coalition forces in

¶2003. Most are unemployed and uneducated. Although JAM rhetoric brims with Islamic references, religious belief has little to do with JAM's appeal. Rather, by joining JAM, young men achieve a sense of self-worth and belonging and a chance to make money. The lower echelons of JAM are comprised of local, unskilled operatives who are reported to earn between \$100-250 for each rocket or mortar attack they launch at Coalition targets.

¶8. (C/REL UK, AUS) The leadership of the JAM is concentrated in the hands of a youthful, dynamic and "angry" group, who are mostly under 30 years old. Abu Qadir, the most recent Basrah commander was only 23 years old when he was killed during a firefight with Iraqi and British forces on May 25. His predecessor, Sayid Naji, who was captured by Coalition forces in December 2006, is about 26. (See ref. D.) These younger Basrawi commanders are becoming increasingly independent of MAS.

Various cells are operating under the JAM banner, but receive direction and financial and material support principally from Iranian sources. Following Qadir's death, Basrah JAM has become even more decentralized as no one has stepped forward to replace him. While there is currently no hierarchical structure, these JAM cells are able to rally in support of each other through the use of cell phones, particularly when engaged with Coalition forces.

IRANIAN INFLUENCE DIVIDES JAM

¶9. (C/REL UK, AUS) In 2005, MAS established secret JAM cells to serve as his professional hit squads. Direction of the secret cells was taken over by Qays al-Kha-zhli (who is in U.S. custody) and Akram al-Kabi of Najaf who turned to Iran for financing and training. Once in Iran, the Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) was able to assert influence over the secret cells, which it employs as an anti-Coalition force. It also began to recruit JAM cells from other areas of Iraq, particularly Basrah, the Coalition's stronghold on its southeastern border and Iraq's economic center.

¶10. (C/REL UK, AUS) Iranian agents recruit JAM cell leaders in Basrah first by making a religious appeal based on common Shi'a beliefs, followed by offers of money, according to multiple sources. If a cell leader resists switching loyalties, then threats are used. If the obduracy continues, a relative of the cell leader is assassinated, and ultimately the cell leader himself is taken out. Similar recruitment and intimidation methods are applied to sheikhs, teachers and other members of society. One REO contact predicts that within one year, Iran will exercise influence over about 90 percent of the JAM adherents in Basrah, compared to about 60 percent at present. Predominantly Sunni countries in the Gulf are reported to support the nationalist branch of JAM as a barrier against the spread of Iranian influence.

¶11. (S/REL UK, AUS) The increasing Iranian influence over JAM is creating a split in the organization between what our contacts

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describe as "nationalist" JAM and "external" or "militant" JAM. MAS is reportedly angered that his best teams have been annexed by Iran, and nationalist JAM leaders are wary of this budding rival with better equipment, training, and resources. While nationalist elements in Basrah proclaim loyalty to MAS, it is evident that this loyalty is not steadfast, and it appears the nationalists in Najaf are growing concerned about this wayward franchise. Intermediaries have approached us, as well as British officials, about the prospects of talks with nationalist JAM and OMS officials. It is not clear where relations between MAS and Iran stand after his four-month sojourn, nor is it clear whether he supports rapprochement with the Coalition. According to a source, a decision by MAS to open talks with the United States could puncture his claim to be Iraq's liberator from the Coalition, but he may be desperate enough to need an ally against Iran.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

¶12. (C/REL UK, AUS) JAM is only one of many Iranian instruments operating in Basrah. The Badr Organization, led by former

Governor Hasan al-Rashid, and Thar Allah, led by Sayid Yusuf al-Musawi, field militias with strong ties to Iran. Political, clerical, and tribal leaders who visit the REO predict that war will break out between the militias after provincial Iraqi control occurs (PIC) and the relocation of British forces to the air station. PIC under these circumstances will be viewed by the militias as a victory over the Coalition. There is speculation that at that point, JAM's usefulness to Iranian intents could end. The only person offering a more comforting view on the prospect for civil strife is Badr's Hasan al-Rashid who said, "since Iraqis have been living in an unstable environment for 20 years, the current situation is normal, and, even if civil war did occur, Iraqis would end up unified in the end."

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